

On the Firing Line (Fifteenth in a series)

Breathe, Breathe in the Air

©2002 JP O'Connor

One of the first exercises we do in clinics is called “Learning to Breathe”. Of course, the athletes have quizzical looks on their face and say, “But we’ve been breathing all our life. What do you mean?” After sharing a laugh, we explain. Infants and very young children breathe very naturally with their belly being drawn down and slightly out as the diaphragm is lowered in order to fill the lungs. Sometime in childhood, as the stress and rush of modern life takes its toll; the natural belly breathing is replaced by a breathing technique that uses upper chest expansion to draw air into the lungs.

In natural belly breathing, the lungs fill in roughly three stages. First the lowest part of the lungs begins to fill as the diaphragm is drawn down and the belly is pushed down and slightly out. Then the middle part of the lungs fill as the lower rib cage expands slightly. Finally, the upper part of the lungs is filled as the upper chest expands. In the more typically observed upper chest breathing, only about 30% of the lung capacity is utilized. Belly breathing has significant positive effect on both the body and the mind.

In one recent clinic, this was made clear to the athletes by their own observations. After teaching the technique and having them quietly stand with eyes closed and comfortably belly breathing, they were asked what they had observed. The answers couldn’t have been better if they had been scripted. One said, “I was very relaxed.” Another added, “My mind became very quiet.” A third said, “I was able to stand much steadier than usual.” Of course, all three of these answers illustrate conditions that we wish to be in as we shoot.

Breathing links physical, mental, and emotional aspects of our being in strong and interesting ways, which we can use to our advantage. The interaction with emotion is seldom thought of and used. The three primary blocks to positive emotional energy flow – anger, sorrow, and fear – are each characterized by an imbalance in breathing. Anger often produces rather weak inhalation with strong, forceful exhalation. Sorrow manifests itself in very weak exhalation coupled with fitful, spasmodic inhalation. Fear causes tension in the body and often causes breathing to be reduced to almost nothing or to stop completely for a few moments. Recognizing these breathing patterns allows the athlete to stop and take corrective action using comfortably slow and deep belly breathing. This will actually take some control over the emotions and conscious mind while also relaxing the body. Because we have much more control over our bodies than we do our thoughts and feelings, breathing this way has a profound effect on our ability to indirectly control and calm emotional and mental activity. Even when positive emotional energy is flowing, the same breathing technique still has mental and physical benefits with quietness of mind and relaxation of the body. Break the cycle of tension with breath control.

“Tense, Shake, Breathe, and Relax: Deliberately tense your whole body as tightly as you can for three to five seconds, while holding your breath. Then gently shake your body. Next, stand tall, as if your head were suspended in space from a string, and breathe slowly, deeply, and evenly from your lower belly. Let the breath bring a sense of deep relaxation.”

“Undoing emotional habits formed over the years isn’t easy, but it can be done. In any moment, you have the capacity to breathe deeply, relax, and let go. Allow rather than resist what arises in the present moment – inside or out. Let it be interesting rather than good or bad. In this way, you reawaken true emotion and the energy to act. [Millman]”

Yogis, Zen masters, and martial artists place great emphasis on breath control and the individual's awareness of breathing and its effects. Deep belly breathing with slow, full, relaxed, and balanced inhalation and exhalation are seen as fundamental to any activity.

Understanding breathing and its effects can be used to advantage in other ways. Many rifle and pistol shooters understand that it is easier to raise the gun on inhalation and then let it – and the body – settle upon exhalation. Breathing also helps with pace and rhythm. For example, in sport pistol and center fire pistol, the second phase of qualification competition requires 5 shot strings delivered one shot at a time in alternating periods of seven seconds pause and three seconds to lift the gun and deliver a shot. This seven-three cycle is often timed with the breathing rhythm. This frees the athlete's mind to remain quiet and allow the string to progress in a natural manner.

At the 2001 Georgia High School State Championship (a 3 position air rifle event), Carra Landrum utilized breathing skills to her benefit. With two shots remaining in the standing phase of qualification she began her usual shot process and, while settling into position, discovered that her trigger finger – indeed her entire right hand – was shaking uncontrollably. Rather than allowing “match nerves” to destroy her performance, she stopped the shot, returned the rifle to her shooting stand, and called on the breathing and relaxation skills that she had learned. Although her mind raced and fear tried to well up, she controlled the situation by stopping to take several comfortably slow belly breaths. This allowed her to regain control of herself – physically, mentally, and emotionally. After delivering an excellent shot, she repeated the breathing in order to compose herself for the last shot, which was also delivered very well. Later she reported, “I was shaking so badly I was afraid that I couldn't even hit the target!” Instead of missing the target, she made the final. At the 2002 state championship, she again called on her breathing skills to do a very good job in the standing position, relax and calm herself for an excellent kneeling phase performed entirely in a Zen-like zone, and to cure “flutter finger” at one point in the final.

Breathing is yet another powerful tool for the athlete's toolkit. Add it to yours!

References:

“Body, Mind Mastery” by Dan Millman (1999), New World Library, revised edition of “The Inner Athlete” (1994)

“Yoga Mind and Body”, by Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center (1996), Dorling Kindersley

The “On The Firing Line” series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as “On the Shooting Line” published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at www.pilkguns.com.

Permission is granted to distribute FREE copies for non-profit educational purposes provided the article is kept unedited in its entirety with all notices, copyright, and other information contained in the document. Any other use requires advance, specific, written permission from the author. The author may be contacted at jpoc@acm.org.

Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O'Connor (jpoc@acm.org and <http://www.america.net/~jpoc/>) is involved in rifle and pistol target shooting as a competitor, is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team, is a Level 3 coach, serves on the National Coach Development Staff, and coaches the rifle and pistol teams at North Georgia College & State University. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and

rifle athletes from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in clinics and one-on-one private coaching, all on a volunteer basis. He also works with musicians and athletes in a variety of sports.

(Biographical information as of October 2009)